

Wednesday, July 27, 2011

Duxbury Clipper

p.17

Comedy, with a side of salsa

Duxbury couple's business interests range from improv comedy to

Mexican food

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Norm Laviolette had a good job with a major marketing firm, which allowed him to travel around the country. Eventually, he found himself with two job opportunities – good ones. But he couldn't bring himself to give up his first love: comedy.

Turns out, it wasn't such a bad business decision after all. Laviolette is co-owner of Improv Asylum, a successful improv theater and bar in Boston's North End. And he and his wife, Kelly, recently opened a restaurant in Duxbury's Millbrook neighborhood.

"Ever since I was a kid I loved comedy, I loved performing," Laviolette said. "But not in a theater major way, more in a joking around kind of way."

In college at UMass Amherst, Laviolette, gravitated towards improvisational comedy groups like Mission Improvable. He also had a short-lived sketch comedy TV show, "Beyond the Norm," which he admitted was "terrible."

After graduation, Laviolette and some friends rented a house on Cape Cod and performed regularly for a sum-

mer at an art gallery in Hyannis as "Go Children Slow." The shows were fun, but when summer ended Laviolette got that "real" job with the marketing firm. But the pull of comedy was always there.

Improv comedy is a little like the stepchild of comedic theater, a mix of Neil Simon-esque dinner theater and stand up comedy. Troupe of actors will take the stage with a minimal set, and the audience will shout out ideas for settings or characters and the actors will take it from there. Often there is a "host" organizing the events, and audience participation (and embarrassment) is standard. It's popular on col-

lege campuses, and is gaining more mainstream acceptance, but it's rare to find professional companies like Improv Asylum.

"We're very much modeled after and inspired by Second City in Chicago," Laviolette said.

Improv Asylum has two casts, the main cast and the NXT cast, kind of a mainstage players-in-training. They also

do classes, touring shows and host corporate events.

Laviolette and some cohorts were doing a show at the Hard Rock Cafe and were enjoying some success – but it was all relative. They were selling out the theater but it was tiny, and their "dressing room" was an unused service elevator shaft.

"A waiter would walk across the stage and shout, 'Who ordered the potato skins?'" Laviolette said.

He and his business partners, Chet Harding and Paul D'Amato, looked around and saw there was no real dedicated space for improv comedy.

"We thought it would be



Kelly and Norm Laviolette outside Yo Taco, the taqueria-style restaurant they started in Duxbury last year.

a great market," he said. "We said, hey, let's do this ourselves."

Eventually, they found the bar and stage space on Hanover Street in Boston's North End that would become Improv Asylum's current home.

Asylum's focus is on making people laugh, but the business plan is solid as well. Laviolette knew he loved comedy, but he wanted to be able to make a living doing it.

"We wanted to focus on the business aspect as well as the artistic aspect," he said.

Comedy isn't his only business venture, however. In August of 2010, he and his wife Kelly, along with local chef Tim Haws, started Yo Taco, a restaurant on Railroad Ave. in the old Back River Fish Market building. They have lived in Duxbury since 2006.

"We loved things like Anna's Taqueria and Boca Grande [when they were living in Boston]" Laviolette said. "There was just not much to choose from down here ... we went looking around and said, 'why don't we just do it ourselves?'"

Kelly Laviolette met Haws, who is a private chef for a Duxbury family, at a swimming lesson at the Percy Walker Pool.

"I said, 'I'm just dying to open up something', and he said, 'So am I.'"

She worked for Bank of America for 10 years, but had experience managing a Chart-house restaurant.

"I've always wanted to get back into the business," she said.

The restaurant opened last August, and although the business was envisioned as seasonal, it's open year-round — at least for now. They serve a variety of taco dishes as well

as frozen yogurt.

Local reception has been positive, although the Laviolettes get a lot of questions about the name. "Yo" means "I" in Spanish, so the name is more a play on the "i-something" trend (think iPhone, iTunes) than a slang expression.

If the business continues to do well, the couple will think about other locations, or looking into a taco truck, something that's become a big trend in the foodie world.

Norm Laviolette has also been busy with Improv Asylum's latest venture, into the world of video. They have a

show, "Improv Asylum's Vanity Project," that's on Saturdays at midnight on Channel 5. They've also made some successful Internet videos, including "Tom Brady 911 call" and "Oscar-winning Boston Movie." The former earned nearly 500,000 hits on YouTube.

A recent sketch, "Clam Wars," was shot on Duxbury Beach and lampoons reality shows like Discovery's "Deadliest Catch."

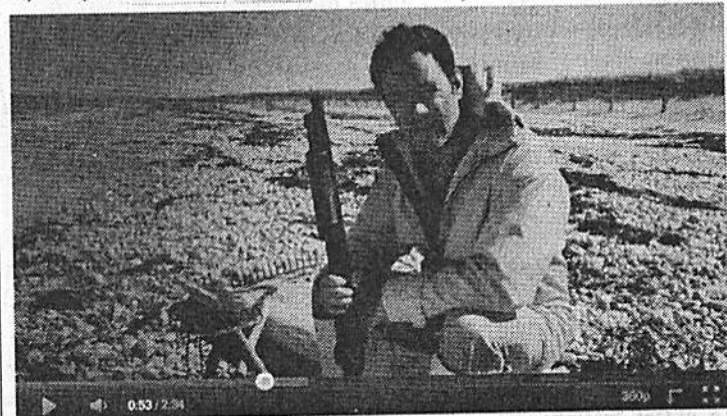
"Where new media is going, we wanted to be a part of that," Laviolette said. He pointed out that a successful viral hit can have 10,000 views in a matter of days. "That's a month of shows for us."

Comedy is a tough business. Is there a secret to being funny? Laviolette says no. But he did say his tactic is to play it straight. He gave the example of a sketch where two brothers are trapped in a burning house, and one turns to the other and starts confessing a laundry lists of things he hates about his sibling. To the characters, it's not funny at all, but to the audience, it's ridiculous.

"You have to believe what it is that you're saying ... almost to the point it's not funny to you," he said. "The audience gets caught up and they start to believe. If I do it all tongue in cheek it won't work. It's not really about 'acting funny' and saying funny things, although that's a part of it. It's about committing to the moment."

Clam Wars

ImprovAsylum 49 videos



Uploaded by ImprovAsylum on Jul 21, 2011

Coming this fall to Discovery! Get ready for some shuck and awe!

9 likes, 1 dislikes

One of Improv Asylum's sketches, "Clam Wars," was filmed on Duxbury Beach.